

Judges want higher marriage license fees to cover divorce work

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WENATCHEE — Chelan County judges are proposing to raise marriage license fees to provide extra help for people going through divorces.

Superior Court Judge T.W. “Chip” Small presented the idea to county commissioners Monday. The judges are asking that the license fee be raised from \$47 to \$62 on April 1, which would bring in an additional \$10,000 a year to help pay for family court services.

Commissioners agreed to hold a public hearing on the idea in the next few weeks.

Small said with the extra money, the judges would increase the hours of two employees whose hours were reduced as part of December budget cuts. One employee would go back to work full time and one would be 95 percent of full time, he said.

The extra hours would be dedicated to family law cases — primarily divorces, but also custody and paternity cases and parenting plans — in which people do not have attorneys.

Small said that when the court laid off a part-time court commissioner in the family law program a couple years ago, the judges had to take on more of those cases. At the same time, though, they are seeing “a constant increase” in the number of people not hiring attorneys to help them through the legal proceedings.

Small said there are many forms that people must fill out. “And a lot of people don’t know what they are doing,” he added.

When people show up to court and haven’t filled out paperwork properly, then they must return at a later time, and another hearing is needed. In some cases, judges must do four or five hearings on one case, he said.

“When you cut your budget to the bone, you find out what ain’t working,” Small said.

The court clerk’s office already has a person assigned to help people with their paperwork two to three days a week. But Small said the court needs someone doing that full time. Paying for two additional people to help will relieve some of the pressure on the judges, he said.

State law allows counties to impose up to an additional \$15 fee on marriage licenses to help pay for family services.

Increasing the fee to \$62 would make Chelan County’s fees the same as those in Douglas County.

Last year, Chelan County issued 618 marriage licenses.

Commissioner Keith Goehner questioned whether increasing the fee will result in fewer people buying licenses in the county. If that were to happen, the revenues would not cover the additional wages paid to the two court employees, he said.

He said when the commissioners set the level of budget cuts for the 2010 budget, “we were asking people to live within their means. In order to meet your budget cuts, you chose to reduce salaries. Now you want to restore them. ... But will we have the income to cover it?”

Goehner and Commissioner Doug England agreed to hold a public hearing to consider raising the fee. The hearing would be held before April 1, when the judges would like the new fee imposed. Commissioner Ron Walter was not present.

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